There are a variety of policy tools being deployed to deal with so-called food deserts—neighborhoods that lack full-service grocery stores and have higher incidence of diet-related diseases like obesity and diabetes. From offering financial incentives to encourage the construction of new grocery stores to promoting and incentivizing visits to local farmers’ markets, these policies attempt to make it easier for residents, particularly in low-income neighborhoods, to access fresh produce and other nutrient-dense food.

The North Carolina General Assembly is currently considering one such policy, aimed at increasing people’s access to fresh, healthy foods. House Bill 387, The Corner Store Initiative, was introduced to the House in March 2017, and is currently in committee. There is also a similar bill in the Senate, Senate Bill 498, The Healthy Food Small Retailer Program. H.B. 387 is designed to assist small food retail outlets—stores that are 5,000 square feet and smaller—in their capacity to offer fresh foods to customers living in food desert neighborhoods. As this blog has previously covered, this is not the state’s first consideration of policy measures to improve food access across the state, but it is one of the most current.

The policy design for the Healthy Food Small Retailer Fund is based on the recognition that low-income neighborhoods have a higher proportion of convenience stores and small grocery stores than high-income areas, and that these stores sell little fresh produce and other nutrient dense foods. Rather than focusing on building new food retail outlets, this program seeks to improve choices at existing retailers where people already shop.

H.B. 387 builds on an ongoing pilot funding program, the Healthy Food Small Retailer Program, which received a one-time appropriation of $250,000 from the North Carolina state legislature for fiscal year 2016. The Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services is in the process of implementing the program. H.B. 387 seeks to codify the program, which provides funding and assistance to small food retailers across the state. The bill would establish the Healthy Food Small Retailer Fund as a restricted reserve within the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, with funds to be used for food desert relief purposes. Food desert zones are determined at the Census tract level, based on measures of poverty and physical proximity to a grocery store. For the purposes of the Healthy Food Small Retailer Fund, food desert zones are areas that meet both of the following criteria:

- the tract’s poverty rate is 20% or greater or has a median family income at or below 80% of North Carolina’s state median family income
- the tract has at least 500 people or at least 33% of the population who live more than one mile from a grocery store or healthy food retail outlet in metropolitan areas, or more than 10 miles in a rural area

People interested in exploring food desert zones in their community can use the USDA’s Food Access Research Atlas, an online data and mapping tool that provides indicators of income and food access at the Census Tract level. The Atlas was updated earlier this year with data from 2015, allowing for comparisons in food access from 2010 to 2015.

Under the bill’s proposed program design, funds would be disbursed to county or regional public health departments, who
would then provide assistance to small food retailers located in food desert zones. Eligible retailers would be able to access funds to purchase refrigeration equipment necessary for stocking fresh produce, as well as to cover expenses of providing technical assistance around nutrition education, marketing and promotion.

Elizabeth Packer is a second year Master’s student in the Department of City and Regional Planning at UNC Chapel Hill and a Community Revitalization Fellow with the Development Finance Initiative.